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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

***CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP AND DOCTRINE: THE UTILITY OF
ANALYZING THE OUTCOME OF THUCYDIDES' THE PELOPONNESIAN
WAR VIA CLAUSEWITZ'S CONCEPTS AS ARTICULATED IN ON WAR***

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Executive Summary

Title: CONTEMPORARY LEADERSHIP AND DOCTRINE: THE UTILITY OF ANALYZING THE OUTCOME OF THUCYDIDES' THE PELOPONNESIAN WAR VIA CLAUSEWITZ'S CONCEPTS AS ARTICULATED IN ON WAR

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Thesis: This paper addresses the following research question: Can the concepts set forth by Clausewitz in On War provide a satisfactory explanation of the outcome of the Peloponnesian War?

Discussion: To answer the research question, the concepts set forth by Clausewitz in On War are applied to both Sparta's victory and Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War. That application is framed by a focus on select aspects of military leadership.

Conclusion: Examination of Clausewitz's general concepts provides a valid theoretical explanation for the outcome of the Peloponnesian War. It also reveals shortcomings in some modern approaches to warfighting, and illustrates the danger of ignoring the essential truth of these broad Clausewitzian concepts when developing doctrine for emerging technologies. It is in this light that that timeless value of the concepts elucidated by Clausewitz and demonstrated by Thucydides is most apparent.

Preface

Comprehending Thucydides' The Peloponnesian War is a challenging task for students at the Marine Corps University Command and Staff College, and the same can be said for Clausewitz's On War. This analysis provides Command and Staff College students a practical basis for applying Clausewitz's concepts to an historical event, and provides them a framework for gaining a better understanding of the Peloponnesian War as an aide to their study of Thucydides. Additionally, this analysis demonstrates the danger of developing modern doctrine without considering relevant history and demonstrates the importance of leadership in relation to doctrine. This paper addresses the following research question: Can the concepts set forth by Clausewitz in On War provide a satisfactory explanation of the outcome of the Peloponnesian War? To answer that question, the concepts set forth by Clausewitz in On War are applied to both Sparta's victory and Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War. That application is framed by a focus on select aspects of military leadership.

For this analysis, I conducted an historical review of all relevant, available literature on the subject in order to gain a critical understanding of Thucydides in terms of Clausewitz's concepts. My hope was to discover historical evidence from the Peloponnesian War that answers the research question, in order to either validate or invalidate the historical verity of Clausewitz's concepts. Additionally, I applied this analysis to a brief survey of contemporary Marine Corps doctrine. This made clear to me

the danger of concentrating on emerging technology during doctrine development, while simultaneously de-emphasizing historical analysis. The Marine Corps appears to recognize this danger and is working to avoid it, but it is evident that some services are falling victim to this dangerous tendency.

My interest in Thucydides dates to my undergraduate studies at Tulane University. There I studied the history of the Athenian Constitution, the impact of democracy on Athens and its eventual decline, and the history of the Peloponnesian War. It was then that I first read On War, for a military science class. In an attempt to better understand both works, and how the concepts described by Clausewitz can be applied to the Peloponnesian War, my research has centered on an analysis of several major events in Thucydides' Peloponnesian War.

I am indebted to two members of the Marine Corps University Command and Staff College faculty who served as my faculty advisors and mentors: Dr. John B. "Black Jack" Matthews, Lieutenant Colonel, USMC (retired); and Lieutenant Colonel Robert P. Wagner, USMC. Dr. Matthews suggested this topic for research, for which I am grateful. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my wife, Andrea, and my children, Jake, Mike, and Kate, who put up with many hours of absenteeism on my part while I was researching and writing this paper.

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Chapter 1

The Legacy of Thucydides and Clausewitz

"Knowledge fortifies courage by the contempt which is its consequence, its trust being placed, not in hope, which is the prop of the desperate, but in a judgment grounded upon existing resources, whose anticipations are more to be depended upon."

- Thucydides¹

"Given the same amount of intelligence, timidity will do a thousand times more damage in war than audacity."

- Carl von Clausewitz²

Introduction

In the annals of classic Western thought only two works fully address the essential difficulties encountered in war.³ The first is Thucydides' The Peloponnesian War, written around 400 BC. The second is Carl Von Clausewitz's On War, published in 1832. Both Thucydides and Clausewitz were soldiers, and generals, and as such would have had a great appreciation of each other, even though separated by nearly 2,000 years. Comprehending Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War is a challenging task for

¹ Thucydides (Robert B. Strassler, ed.), The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War (New York: The Free Press, 1996) p. 125. Hereafter referenced as Thucydides.

² Carl Von Clausewitz, On War, eds. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1976) 191.

³ Christopher Bassford, On War 2000 (Unpublished Research Proposal, <http://www.mnsinc.com/cbassfrd/CWZHOME/complex/Proposax.htm>) 1.

students of the art and science of war; the same can be said for On War. The purpose of this analysis is to provide students with a practical basis for applying Clausewitz's concepts to an historical event and provide them with a framework for better understanding the outcome of the Peloponnesian War. As such, this paper applies the concepts set forth in Clausewitz's work, On War, to the Peloponnesian War, to improve understanding of the outcome of that war in terms of war theory. It relates these concepts to both Sparta's victory and Athens' defeat, focusing on selected aspects of military leadership. This analysis is not encumbered by which general (Thucydides or Clausewitz) came first; it is not attempting to evaluate one general in terms of the other, or compare and contrast them to determine who was more relevant. For it is the intermingling of military history as recorded by Thucydides with the military theory of Clausewitz that seems to hold timeless value. Thus, this paper assesses an early period in military history as recorded by Thucydides through the more contemporary lens of Clausewitz's terms and concepts. This yields relevant lessons for the modern student of military history and military theory.

The concepts set forth by Clausewitz in On War provide a rational explanation for the outcome of the Peloponnesian war. Additionally, analysis of Thucydides' The Peloponnesian War via the major concepts set forth by Clausewitz in On War validates the historical verity of Clausewitz's concepts. Individually, the two works are challenging to read and frequently misunderstood. However, by comparing and contrasting the major themes in Clausewitz with the significant events recorded by Thucydides, students of war can garner a greater appreciation for the modern relevance, and historical significance, of both works.

Thucydides in Context

Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) describes the conflict between the nation-states of Sparta and Athens, as well as their various allies. This conflict leads to the fall of the ancient Athenian Empire, the birthplace of Western culture and thought. Thucydides, an Athenian general, dedicates himself to recording for future generations an account of what was the most significant event that had occurred in the ancient Western world.

Thucydides' purpose is to record a history that will benefit future generations. Early in the book he states that he has written his work "not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession of for all time."⁴ Thus, he intends to create a timeless work. In this regard, Thucydides is successful, for his work remains one of the most useful histories of war ever written, despite the fact that it was recorded more than 2,400 years ago. Yet, Thucydides intends this work to be more than a historical narrative. The primary reason that his work remains valid today is that he invents strategic analysis in this treatise. This fact alone merits his consideration as a great thinker.

Thucydides writes amidst the intellectual revolution occurring in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. Western culture is invented in Athens during Thucydides' lifetime; this is the time of the Greek enlightenment and the birth of the Age of Reason. As a result, there exists in Thucydides' work an historic realism⁵ that is absent from the

⁴ Thucydides 16.

⁵ Historic Realism: Thucydides is doing something unprecedented: he assumes that the universe is an intelligible whole and that through rational inquiries men might discover the general principles that govern it. A lesser known Greek writer and predecessor of both Thucydides and Herodotus, Hecateus of Miletus, applied the same realism to the largely mythical Greek traditions when he wrote, early in the 5th century, "the stories of the Greeks are numerous and in my opinion ridiculous." Modern scholars refer to this

earlier works of Herodotus⁶, considered the first Greek historian.⁷ Therefore, Thucydides is the first historian to emphasize scientific inquiry, while depreciating superstition and religious interpretations of events.⁸ Herodotus gave great importance to the intervention of the gods in historical events. Thucydides is remarkably different. Only in one instance does he give oracles credit for predicting future events.⁹ His account of the plague is rational and scientific, wholly discounting supernatural explanations.¹⁰

This is a radical approach, as Greeks, up to this time, had invariably attributed plagues as punishments meted out by the gods. Thucydides purposely makes no such attribution.¹¹ He explains the world in physical terms and not as a result of actions of the gods. His is the first western mind to apply this rational method to the study of war. This

approach as historiography: "The writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particulars from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those particulars into a narrative that will stand the test of critical methods." See The New Encyclopaedia Britannica, Volume 20, 15th Edition (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1995) 559

⁶ Herodotus (b. 494 BC? – d. 430-420): Herodotus is the Greek author of the first great narrative history produced in the ancient world, the history of the Greco-Persian wars. About 1,000 ancient Greeks wrote in on historical subjects, but only in a few cases have complete texts of all their writings survived. Herodotus, whom the Roman statesman Cicero called "the father of history," came from the western coast of Asia Minor. Herodotus is more of a traditionalist than Thucydides is, but introduces his work as an "inquiry" (*historia*). Herodotus clearly believes in the intervention of the gods in his description of historical events. However, at times he emphasizes the actions of men rather than divine retribution, and as such introduces a rationalistic approach that evolves into the historic realism of Thucydides.

⁷ Robert D. Luginbill, Thucydides on War and National Character (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) 21.

⁸ George Cawkwell, Thucydides and the Peloponnesian War (New York: Routledge, 1997) 2-3.

⁹ The Greeks used superstition and religion to explain natural events and human behavior. Religious references and gods appear frequently in The Peloponnesian War, but the work does not suggest that Thucydides himself held deep religious beliefs, or believed in oracles and prophecy. He seems to treat religion more as a social institution. See Strassler's introduction to Thucydides, section IV.i. Thucydides' cynicism towards prophecy is illustrated when he calculates the period of the war in section 5.26. Here Thucydides calculates the duration of the war and states that calculation "provides an instance of faith in oracles **being for once justified by the event** (emphasis added)". See Thucydides 316.

¹⁰ Thucydides is contemptuous of religious explanations for natural events when he describes the plague that struck Athens soon after Sparta entered the war, but never entered the Peloponnesus. Thucydides contends that the people conveniently remembered an ancient prophecy in a manner that fit their particular circumstances when they recall that the prophecy predicted *loimos* (plague) rather than *limos* (famine). He states that had famine, and not plague, struck Athens, the people would have made their recollection of the same prophecy fit those circumstances instead. Thucydides 121.

¹¹ Thucydides 118.

method serves as the basis for his history of the Peloponnesian War. His reliance on reason and historical proof, as opposed to legend, is evident when he states:

On the whole, however, the conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied upon. Assuredly they will not be disturbed either by the verses of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend. Turning from these, we can rest satisfied with having proceeded upon the clearest data . . .”¹²

Thus, Thucydides is above all else a rational historian, evaluating the war from a scientific, historical perspective. It is in this light that his work must be considered as worthy of merit and careful scrutiny.

Thucydides is well qualified to deliver this narrative. He begins the war as a general in the Athenian armed forces. During the eighth year of the war, the Spartan commander, Brasidas, gains access to the Athenian city of Amphipolis, whose citizens appeal to Thucydides for assistance. Thucydides leaves Thasos with his forces immediately, but arrives at Amphipolis after its citizens have capitulated.¹³ As a result of these events, over which Thucydides had no control, the Athenian *polis* unfairly accuses Thucydides of incompetence, and exiles him from Athens.¹⁴ Consequently, Thucydides is released from all obligations to Athens, and is able to freely travel throughout the theater of operations. As he explains, “being present with both parties, and more especially with the Peloponnesians by reason of my exile, I had the leisure to observe affairs more closely.”¹⁵ However, Thucydides does not rely solely on his own impressions of the war;

¹² Thucydides 15.

¹³ Thucydides 279-281.

¹⁴ Thucydides 316.

¹⁵ Thucydides 316.

he claims the accuracy of his report was “tried by the most severe and detailed tests possible.”¹⁶

Thucydides offers a single, important, caveat to the historical accuracy of his account:

With reference to the speeches in this history, some were delivered before the war began, others while it was going on; some I heard myself, others I got from various quarters; it was in all cases difficult to carry them word for word in one’s memory, so my habit has been to make the speakers say what was in my opinion demanded of them by the various occasions, of course adhering as closely as possible to the general sense of what they really said.¹⁷

This approach to the speeches allows Thucydides to exploit a key component of his narrative technique – the use of the dialectic, a method of argument that weighs contradictory theories with a view to their resolution. Formalized by Plato, later used by Clausewitz, and perhaps best known in the works of Karl Marx¹⁸, Thucydides uses this form of reasoning to pit statements from either side of an argument, thesis and antithesis, against each other. The result is a synthesis of the logical parts of each argument. In the speeches found in his history, Thucydides presents both sides of each argument, utilizing the dialectic approach, and allows each reader to arrive at the synthesis independently.

While allowing the readers to draw their own conclusions, Thucydides clearly attributes the general cause of the Peloponnesian War to "the growth of Athenian power

¹⁶ Thucydides 15

¹⁷ Thucydides 15.

¹⁸ For classical Greek thinkers, the meaning of dialectic ranged from a technique of polemics to the investigation of relationships between specific circumstances and general ideals. Later, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel maintained that the dialectic was the tendency of an idea to develop its own negation due to the conflict between its inherent contradictory aspects. Marx adopted this definition when he developed dialectical materialism, which used the dialectic to maintain that any attempt to reconcile materialism (the material world) with idealism would necessarily result in inconsistency and confusion. The study of the various forms of dialectics is known as dialectology.

and the fear this caused in Sparta.”¹⁹ The ultimate defeat of Athens is primarily attributed to the expansion of the war to Sicily. Thucydides’ account of this disastrous Athenian expedition contains his widest themes, which are offered in a single narrative. Here he presents the underlying causes for the expansion of the Peloponnesian War to Sicily: national interest, greed, honor, treaty obligations, and security concerns.

Thus, expansion of the war results from the synthesis of idealistic and *real-politik* concerns. His presentation of these broad themes describing the cause and effect of war places Thucydides among the greatest thinkers about strategies and theories of war. Applying the concepts that Clausewitz articulates in On War facilitates the understanding of these themes; such analysis provides a better understanding of why Athens lost the war.

Thucydides’ work is challenging. Like Clausewitz, it is not prescriptive in nature and is not easy to read. Like Clausewitz, his use of the dialectic tends to obfuscate themes for readers unfamiliar with this approach. Understanding Thucydides demands intellectual rigor on the part of the serious student of war and is more manageable when his history is considered in relation to On War, as simultaneous inquiry into both works contributes to understanding the ultimate outcome of the Peloponnesian war.

Thus, analysis of Thucydides in terms of Clausewitz’s concepts promotes the student’s appreciation of war theory in general and the outcome of Athens’ war with Sparta in particular. In the broadest context, this aids in understanding why Thucydides’ work stands the test of time. Thucydides’ work is not just a story of a struggle between two powerful city-states fighting for hegemony in the ancient world. It serves as a foundation for discerning the strategic implications of broad policy, and why wars are

¹⁹ Thucydides 16.

ultimately won or lost. Additionally, it is an excellent case study of events at both the operational and tactical levels of war.

Thucydides forces the student to consider many elements of war not directly discussed by Clausewitz, including maritime warfare, technology's influence on tactics, economic factors in war, social factors in war such as disease and the baseness of mankind, the role of law in war, and the influence of cultural issues (such as art and sport) on warfare. Moreover, Thucydides considers the impact of international (i.e. inter-city-state) war on the internal civil affairs of the state. As such, Thucydides serves as an effective bridge between the study of war theory in general (e.g. Clausewitz) and a broader study of policy and strategy in relation to war theory.

Clausewitz in Context

The American strategic thinker Bernard Brodie has characterized Clausewitz's On War as "not simply the greatest, but the only great book about war."²⁰ One of the aspects of On War that sets it apart from the works of other military theorists is Clausewitz's intentional transcendence of the limitations inherent in applying temporal political or technological circumstances to war theory. He deliberately couches the work in terms that avoid discussion of technical and political circumstances unique to his time. It is this feature that allows Clausewitz's work to be used as the conceptual guide to understanding war throughout successive generations.²¹

Like Thucydides, Clausewitz expresses hope that his work "would not be forgotten after two or three years, and that possibly [it] might be picked up more than

²⁰ Michael Howard, Clausewitz (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 1.

²¹ Howard 1.

once by those who are interested in the subject.”²² Like Thucydides, Clausewitz is difficult to “read with comprehension, even though the ideas presented are not intrinsically difficult.”²³ Brodie attributes this to several reasons.²⁴ First, Clausewitz’s work is an unfinished work, and was never completed to the author’s satisfaction.²⁵ As a result, arguments are not always logically organized and the order of their presentation is sometimes uncoordinated.

Understanding is further hampered by Clausewitz’s method of using the dialectic approach in the book. This method of argument is foreign to most readers, especially military planners, and is therefore subject to widespread misinterpretation. By fully articulating each side of an argument – thesis and antithesis – Clausewitz incurs two unfortunate costs. First, unlike Thucydides, Clausewitz’s use of the dialectic does not entail dialogues, or debates, between two parties with opposing views. Thus, when these competing ideas are not contiguously presented the reader risks fully seizing one while completely ignoring the other. Second, when Clausewitz does present the ideas sequentially, without intermediate digressions, readers unfamiliar with the dialectic style often dismiss Clausewitz as contradictory and confusing.

This common misinterpretation by readers is complicated by the frequent tendency of military-minded individuals to look for prescriptive solutions to their problems. This is unfortunate, as military readers serve to gain the most from Clausewitz, and ironic, as military leaders are Clausewitz’s target audience – an audience that he may fail to fully engage due to his obscure academic style and faulty organization.

²² Clausewitz 63.

²³ See Bernard Brodie, “A Guide to the Reading of *On War*,” in Clausewitz 641.

²⁴ Brodie, “A Guide to the Reading of *On War*,” in Clausewitz 641.

²⁵ See Peter Paret’s “The Genesis of *On War*,” in Clausewitz 3.

Clausewitz, like Thucydides, is anything but prescriptive. He does not provide a standing operating procedure or list of principles on how to conduct a war, yet many attempt to extract such principles from On War. For example, many military theorists, in order to fill a prescription for warfighting, have stretched Clausewitz's concept of centers of gravity into a rigid principle. This is contrary to Clausewitz's intent; he expects the reader to think critically, and cramming his concepts into a computer model for warfighting is counterproductive. An example of this is the monograph by Major Phillip Kevin Giles and Captain Thomas P. Galvin, Center of Gravity: Determination, Analysis, and Application. This treatise serves as an example of exactly what shouldn't be done with Clausewitz. It is a cookbook that prescribes a lockstep approach for center of gravity determination.²⁶

Misinterpretation is compounded by the tendency to take Clausewitz's concepts out of context. There are two aspects to context: the historical context of the time, which despite Clausewitz's attempt to write a timeless work, cannot be ignored; and the meaning of a passage within the context of its supporting paragraph, chapter, book, and the work as a whole.²⁷ Lifting a sentence out of context to support an argument is dangerous and misleading; this tendency has perpetuated the misuse and overuse of many Clausewitzian ideas.

Clearly, Clausewitz endeavors to develop a comprehensive, systematic approach to the study of war.²⁸ His approach allows him to view the campaigns of Frederick and Napoleon through a unique lens, which sets his work apart from his contemporaries, who

²⁶ MAJ Phillip Kevin Giles and CPT Thomas P. Galvin, Center of Gravity: Determination, Analysis, and Application (Center for Strategic Leadership, USA War College, 1996).

²⁷ Brodie, "A Guide to the Reading of *On War*," in Clausewitz 641.

²⁸ Michael I. Handel, ed., Clausewitz and Modern Strategy (London: Frank Cass, 1986) 152.

tend to view war theory as a set of fixed principles. These prescriptive theorists include Bülow, Lloyd, and to some degree Jomini.²⁹

While both Clausewitz and Jomini derive theories from historical study, Jomini advocates rigid principles, and teaches that deviating from them is dangerous, while observing them invariably results in victory. The validity of this thesis is suspect when logically questioned: If two adversaries both adhere to these inviolate principles, how can both invariably achieve victory? In contrast, Clausewitz contends, “Theory should be study, not doctrine.”³⁰ Theory, he writes:

Will have fulfilled its main task when it is used to analyze the constituent elements of war, to distinguish precisely what at first sight seems fused, to explain in full the properties of the means employed and to show their probable effects, to define clearly the nature of the ends in view, and to illuminate all phases of warfare through critical inquiry.³¹

Clausewitz emphasizes the importance of conducting critical inquiry in formulating war theory. This leads one to the conclusion that theory, to be valid, cannot deal with a particular war or period in history.³² He states “the influence of theoretical truths on practical life is always exerted more through critical analysis than through doctrine.”³³ It is in this context that Clausewitz’s concepts must be considered; they are concepts, not principles. Application of these concepts demands critical analysis,³⁴ not rote application of doctrine.

Ironically, Clausewitz’s work achieved critical acclaim at the expense of the accurate interpretation of his central themes. His emphasis on concepts as opposed to

²⁹ Handel 152.

³⁰ Clausewitz 141.

³¹ Clausewitz 141.

³² Handel 154.

³³ Clausewitz 156.

³⁴ Clausewitz uses the term *Kritik* which means “Critique, critical analysis, evaluation, and interpretation,” not “criticism.” See Clausewitz 156.

doctrine has been misconstrued to the extent that many of his greatest admirers routinely invoke his work as a prescription for success, taking central arguments entirely out of context. According to his biographer, Roger Parkinson, this misinterpretation of Clausewitz is partly Clausewitz's own fault: "In On War, as in life, he had been too logical, too anxious to debate rather than to declare, too anxious to consider the extremes before adopting a correct and sensible middle course."³⁵

Parkinson goes on to summarize the great misfortune of Clausewitz as a soldier and strategist:

Few of his nineteenth-century readers penetrated Clausewitz's logic in On War to evaluate his real meaning. When Clausewitz was alive, few men achieved a true understanding and appreciation of his personal worth. For much the same reasons, the best use was not made of On War, and the best use was not made of Carl von Clausewitz as a soldier and strategist.³⁶

³⁵ Roger Parkinson, Clausewitz, A Biography (New York: Stein and Day, 1970) 337.

³⁶ Parkinson 337.

Chapter 2

Clausewitzian Concepts as Applied to Thucydides³⁷

"Consider the vast influence of accident in war, before you are engaged in it. As it continues, it generally becomes an affair of chances, chances from which neither of us is exempt, and whose event we must risk in the dark."

-Thucydides³⁸

"Everything in strategy is very simple, but that does not mean that everything is very easy."

- Carl von Clausewitz³⁹

The Relationship of Policy and War

Clausewitz emphasizes the relationship of policy and war in On War. Athens' failure to clearly understand and nurture this relationship was a major contributing factor to their defeat. Examination of select passages of On War via Thucydides illustrates this point. In his discussion on centers of gravity, Clausewitz states, "We must be certain our political position is so sound that this success will not bring in further enemies against us who could force us to abandon our efforts against our first opponent."⁴⁰ While some

³⁷ While numerous Clausewitzian concepts are present in Thucydides, this essay focuses on the following critical concepts as applied to Athens and Sparta during certain events of the war: The relationship of policy and war, military genius, friction, centers of gravity, the culminating point, and the trinity.

³⁸ Thucydides 44.

³⁹ Clausewitz 178.

⁴⁰ Clausewitz 597.

Athenian policy makers clearly understand this concept, others fail to appreciate it when formulating grand strategy.

Contrasting the ultimate outcome of the Mytilenian debate with the Athenian decision later in the war to invade Sicily illustrates this point. In the fourth year of the Peloponnesian war, the people of the Athenian colony of Mytilene revolt. Eventually Athens reconquers Mytilene and initially condemns all Mytilenians to death. A debate then ensues between two key Athenian leaders this condemnation. In the debate, Diodotus argues against Cleon's desire to butcher innocent people by stating, "you will play directly into the hands of the higher class, who when they induce their cities to rise, will immediately have The People on their side."⁴¹ Diodotus wins the argument, and Athenian voters reverse the decision to butcher the Mytilenians. In this case, Athens clearly understands the relationship between policy and war. The decision to spare the Mytilenians is based on rational national policy.

Unfortunately for the Athenians this understanding is absent later in the war, when they decide to invade Sicily. Ultimately this decision, based on prior Athenian successes, has its foundation in Athenian greed, not rational policy. The invasion brings additional enemies to bear against Athens (e.g. Syracuse) and weakens the Athenian's ability to wage war on Sparta. Thucydides considers this discontinuity between policy and the military's ability to support it to be a major factor in Athens' defeat. He states:

But what most oppressed them was that they [now] had two wars at once, and had thus reached a pitch of frenzy which no one would have believed possible. . . . Could anyone have imagined that even when besieged by the Peloponnesians entrenched in Attica, they would still stay on there [in Sicily]?⁴²

⁴¹ Thucydides 182.

⁴² Thucydides 443.

Clearly, Athens' strategic overstretch is the result of the peoples' failure to insure that their political position is sound. Their success in the Hellenes, temporary peace with Sparta, and relative prosperity, leads them to invade Sicily. This brings more enemies against Athens and forces them to fight on two fronts, or risk abandoning the effort against their first opponent, Sparta. This failure to appreciate the relationship between policy and war is the major factor contributing to Athens' defeat in the Peloponnesian War.

Another interesting facet of this relationship that can be explored in Thucydides and Clausewitz is the role of military leaders in determining national policy and strategy. Leaders desiring to make informed decisions on the use of force have long recognized as a pivotal issue the question of what role senior military leaders should play in determining national strategy.⁴³ In the modern era, H. R. McMaster's Dereliction of Duty argues that the United States' Joint Chiefs of Staff abdicated their responsibility by never making clear to the National Command Authority what they knew to be necessary for victory in Vietnam.⁴⁴

Athenian military leaders greatly contributed to shaping national policy. This is primarily a result of the nature of Athenian government, where generals played a vital role. Generals, selected from the assembly, were elected for annual terms, and could be re-elected without interruption. At any given time ten generals were serving, one from each of the Hellenic tribes represented in the assembly.⁴⁵

⁴³ John Garofano, "Deciding on Military Intervention: What is the Role of Senior Military Leaders?" Naval War College Review, Spring 2000, Vol. LIII, No. 2: 40.

⁴⁴ See H. R. McMaster, Dereliction of Duty (New York: Harper Collins, 1997)

⁴⁵ Thucydides 580.

Within the assembly, Generals held extraordinary power. For example, a general could convene unscheduled meetings of the assembly (imagine the political implication if a service chief or combatant commander in the United States military had the power to convene a special session of the U.S. Congress). The decision on whether or not to call a special session at critical times had far reaching consequences on determining Athenian national policy and strategy.⁴⁶ Sometimes the decision not to convene a session demonstrated more acumen than convening a session would have shown.

For instance, in the first year of the war, Pericles, the leading Athenian General, refuses to call a meeting of the assembly in an effort to prevent the Athenians from engaging in an offensive land battle against the invading Spartans.⁴⁷ The means by which Pericles is able to block this meeting are unclear; it is certain, however, that such action was not uncommon and that Generals played pivotal roles in determining national objectives and formulating foreign policy. Clausewitz speaks to the risks associated with such a system of strategy determination. He raises several critical issues regarding this matter, while leaving others open to interpretation.⁴⁸ Clausewitz wants military views to be contemplated during policy deliberations, but does not want them to determine the outcome of such deliberations. He supports this position by providing historical examples of military disasters that have befallen nations who entrusted war policy decisions solely to their generals.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Thucydides 580.

⁴⁷ Thucydides 104.

⁴⁸ Garafano 45.

⁴⁹ Garafano 44.

For Clausewitz one can only view the essential nature of war through a political lens.⁵⁰ He believes that “no other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political.”⁵¹ Clausewitz clearly articulates this position when he states:

Nor indeed is it sensible to summon soldiers, as many governments do when they are planning a war, and ask them for purely military advice. But it makes even less sense for theoreticians to assert that all available military resources should be put at the disposal of the commander so that on their basis he can draw up purely military plans for a war or a campaign. . . . No major proposal required for war can be worked out in ignorance of political factors; and when people talk, as they often do, about harmful political influence on the management of war, they are not really saying what they mean. Their quarrel should be with the policy itself, not with its influence. If the policy is right – that is, successful – any intentional effect it has on the conduct of the war can only be to the good. If it has the opposite effect the policy itself is wrong.⁵²

Thus, political constraints are only bad military policy when they ask the military to accomplish things “foreign to their nature.”⁵³ Or, as Clausewitz puts it, “Policy is the guiding intelligence and war only the instrument, not vice versa. No other possibility exists, then, than to subordinate the military point of view to the political.”⁵⁴

However, while war has in many ways maintained certain qualities since Clausewitz’s, and even Thucydides’, time it has also changed in many fundamental ways, which place additional responsibility on the military leader. At a minimum, war has increased dramatically in complexity. This complexity increases the chance that politicians may fundamentally misuse or misdirect the military based on faulty

⁵⁰ Garafano 43.

⁵¹ Clausewitz 607.

⁵² Clausewitz 607-608.

⁵³ Garafano 45.

⁵⁴ Clausewitz 607.

understanding of roles, missions, and functions. This is especially true in crisis situations.⁵⁵

Several conclusions can be drawn from this analysis. First, Athenian generals tended to dictate policy rather than offer military advice formulated in the context of pre-existing national political policy. Second, Clausewitz cautions against this approach to formulating policy, and points to it as a precursor to military and ultimately national disaster, offering historical examples to bolster his position. Third, the complexity of modern times reinforces the importance of military leaders offering sound advice to policy makers; these leaders, however, must remain vigilant against overstepping their bounds, lest they suffer the fate of the Athenian generals.

Military Genius

It is valuable to examine these aspects of leadership in terms of what Clausewitz calls military genius. To understand the role of the commander, in terms of genius, one must comprehend Clausewitz's meaning. It is apparent that he does not consider the word to mean genius as commonly defined: "A person who has an exceptionally high intelligence quotient, typically above 140."⁵⁶ His meaning in On War is, according to Brodie, "quite distinctive from what we call genius in other callings."⁵⁷ Clausewitz states that he is "aware that this word is used in many senses, differing both in degree and kind [and that] some of these meanings make it difficult to establish the essence of genius."⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Garofano 45-47.

⁵⁶ American Heritage College Dictionary, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) 568.

⁵⁷ Brodie, "A Guide to the Reading of *On War*," in Clausewitz 647.

⁵⁸ Clausewitz 100.

In no uncertain terms, Clausewitz declares that by genius he means “a very highly developed mental aptitude for a particular occupation.”⁵⁹ He further clarifies this meaning, in terms of military genius, when he states that he cannot restrict his discussion to “genius proper,” as that would lack “measurable limits.” Rather, he instructs the reader to “survey all gifts of mind and temperament that in combination bear on military activity. These, taken together, constitute *the essence of military genius.*”⁶⁰

Clausewitz is careful to point out that his definition states “taken together.” He cautions the reader not to consider individual military talents in isolation; it is only the combination of these qualities that allows for the proper evaluation of military genius.⁶¹ The central issue then becomes the identification of what specific qualities, when taken in combination, constitute the proper indicators of military genius.

The first quality Clausewitz identifies is “a degree of intellectual power,” though the amount of power required is unspecified.⁶² He asserts that only civilized societies can produce brilliant soldiers, and believes that primitive societies lack the intellectual capacity to develop brilliant commanders. For proof he points to the fact that the “greatest names [of people renowned in war] do not appear before a high level of civilization has been reached.”⁶³ This proof is somewhat dubious, as pre-civilized societies had limited capacity for recording historical events, so any military genius present would have remained, for the most part, unheralded in written history. History

⁵⁹ Clausewitz 100.

⁶⁰ Clausewitz 100.

⁶¹ Clausewitz 100.

⁶² Clausewitz 100.

⁶³ Clausewitz 101.

does record the occasional presence of military geniuses in savage society, contrary to Clausewitz's claims, most notably Genghis Khan.⁶⁴

Even so, while unarguably great military leaders must possess some degree of intellectual power, it appears that Clausewitz is emphasizing that military genius does not require extraordinary intelligence, in the general sense. The intellectual qualities required of a military genius are intuition, aggressive determination, and a "strong mind, rather than a brilliant one."⁶⁵ This quality of intuition is characterized by Clausewitz as *coup d'oeil*, and defined as the ability to distinguish, the "glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth."⁶⁶ This talent in isolation is not sufficient to identify genius. The gifted military leader must have the courage to "follow this faint light wherever it may lead."⁶⁷ Thus, intuition must be accompanied by courage.

Clausewitz identifies two types of courage, which correspond to the two types familiar to modern students of military leadership. The first he categorizes as courage in the face of physical danger. This is referred to today as physical courage. The second is the courage to accept responsibility on the basis of conscience. This is known today as moral courage.

Clausewitz begins his discussion of the first of these two types of courage – courage in the face of personal danger – by further sub-dividing it into two types:

⁶⁴ Genghis Khan (1167? -1227) was a Mongol conqueror and founder of the Mongol Empire, spanning the continent of Asia by the time of his death. Folklore is the only source for details about his ancestry, birth, and much of his life. Genghis Khan knew no language but Mongolian; yet, he was not without knowledge of the civilized nations beyond the borders of Mongolia. However, the superb Mongol army owed nothing to civilized foreign models. It was developed and perfected by Genghis Khan in intertribal wars before he used it to conquer Asia and Eastern Europe. It is as a military genius that Genghis Khan is remembered, considered by some the equal of Alexander the Great and Napoleon, neither whom achieved such vast nor such enduring conquests. Even so, he was a savage from an uncivilized tribal society. Adapted from "Genghis Khan," [Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia 2000](#) (Microsoft Corporation, 2000)

⁶⁵ Clausewitz 648.

permanent courage based on the individual's personal indifference to danger and temporary courage, based on motives that are limited to a particular time and place.⁶⁸ He asserts that the best courage a leader can possess is a combination of these two types of physical courage.

However, it is the quality of moral courage – the courage to accept responsibility in a moral predicament – that often allows a great leader to doggedly pursue the often dimly illuminated decisive course of action revealed to the military genius by his *coup d'oeil*. Thus, both physical and moral courage are necessary for a leader to take advantage of the military intuition required for success on the battlefield. These qualities are amplified in great leaders by their presence of mind.

Clausewitz defines presence of mind as “an increased capacity of dealing with the unexpected.”⁶⁹ From this discussion he derives several other dependent characteristics, which, according to the circumstances, include: energy, firmness, staunchness, emotional balance, and strength of character.⁷⁰ Of these, energy is worthy of note. Clausewitz associates it with the German term *Ehrgeiz*, loosely translated as “greed for honor.”⁷¹ He believes that the German language unjustly tarnishes a requisite longing for honor on the part of the commander.

Brodie believes that there is some personal insight offered by Clausewitz in his self-revelatory insistence that the longing for honor and renown are more powerful than any other passions on the battlefield. While other emotions may be more common, “they

⁶⁶ Clausewitz 102.

⁶⁷ Clausewitz 102.

⁶⁸ Clausewitz 101.

⁶⁹ Clausewitz 103.

⁷⁰ Clausewitz 104-105.

⁷¹ Clausewitz 105.

are no substitute for a thirst for fame and honor.”⁷² Modern examples, such as General Douglas MacArthur, seem to support Clausewitz in this regard.

Clausewitz concludes his lengthy discussion on genius by describing the trait of strength of character. By this he means “the ability to keep one’s head at times of exceptional stress and violent emotion.”⁷³ He stresses that intellectual prowess alone will not account for such strength. Furthermore, he cautions against allowing such strength from degenerating into obstinacy. He articulates that the line between obstinacy and strength of character is thin.⁷⁴

Careful reading of Clausewitz’s discussion on military genius therefore reveals that he considers it to be a matter of temperament and character, rather than a matter of intellect.⁷⁵ Thus, willpower is fundamental to genius,⁷⁶ but such will must be carefully tempered by *coup d’oeil* else it results in obstinacy. Military experience is not a prerequisite for military genius. Consideration of the United States’ Civil War marks Abraham Lincoln as a military genius with virtually no prior experience. He not only demonstrated a remarkable insight into the necessary strategy, and the subordination of war-making to policy, but possessed the “self-confidence and strength of will to pursue it over the resistance of men with what must have seemed far better credentials than his own.”⁷⁷ This strength of will allowed Lincoln to overcome the forces of what Clausewitz called friction, which stemmed from the uncertainty, chance, suffering, confusion, exhaustion, and fear associated with war.⁷⁸

⁷² Brodie, “A Guide to the Reading of *On War*,” in Clausewitz 648.

⁷³ Clausewitz 105.

⁷⁴ Clausewitz 108.

⁷⁵ Christopher Bassford, *Clausewitz in English* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) 11.

⁷⁶ Bassford, *Clausewitz in English* 25.

⁷⁷ Bassford, *Clausewitz in English* 53.

⁷⁸ Bassford, *Clausewitz in English* 25.

In the famous Mytilenian debate, Diodotus demonstrates characteristics consistent with Clausewitz's concept of military genius. Diodotus argues for calm deliberation without passion, emotion, or hasty judgement. He has the presence to recognize the serious strategic implications of arbitrarily executing the Mytilenian population. Further, he has the courage to convey this insight to the *polis* in the face of fierce political opposition, thereby risking his career and his reputation as a loyal Athenian.⁷⁹

Pericles is perhaps the strongest example of military genius in Thucydides' classic work. Like Lincoln, Pericles overcomes the friction of uncertainty and fear associated with war. He demonstrates a remarkable ability to not only perceive the correct course for Athens, but a willingness to hold that course in the face of great criticism and even political ridicule. He is able to do so, however, without becoming obstinate, and thoughtfully considers arguments against his strategic judgment before speaking to the *polis*.⁸⁰

Pericles' presence of mind is remarkable. In the midst of a devastating plague, Athens seems ready to concede victory to the Spartans, and begins parleying for a peaceful resolution to the war on terms favorable to the Spartans. Pericles is adamant; he concludes that all has gone according to the Athenian plan, with the exception of the plague. He urges the Athenians to stay the course and cease negotiations.⁸¹

Recognizing the relative scarcity of effective Athenian leaders possessing the characteristics of military genius is fundamental to an understanding of why Athens was ultimately defeated. The national character of Athens demonstrates a proclivity for recklessness and emotional decision-making (not unlike the United States). In each case

⁷⁹ Thucydides, 179-182.

⁸⁰ Thucydides, 126-128.

in which Thucydides recounts actions by Athens that are contrary to this character, one almost invariably finds these variances to be the result of an effective leader overriding these dangerous national characteristics through the demonstration of Clausewitzian-like military genius.⁸² Yet, leaders who break out of this national tendency of rash action are by far the exception in Thucydides. Ultimately it is the Athenians inability to act contrary to their national character, because of the lack of sufficient leadership to overcome that character, which leads to their demise.

The lesson here for modern leaders is sobering. Contrary to the much quoted Weinberger Doctrine, clearly there are times when leaders must act when there *is not* reasonable assurance that their actions will be supported by the will of the people and the Congress, at least initially. A measure of the strength of the leader is whether he has the insight to identify these situations, the courage to stay the course when faced with opposition, and the ability to convince the people that action contrary to their national character is indeed in their best interest. In the case of the Athenians, this insight belonged to Pericles, but chance intervened and Athens was denied his genius from an early stage in the war.

Thus, chance greatly influenced the Peloponnesian War. Clausewitz discusses in detail the influence of chance throughout On War. He states early in the book that chance makes war a gamble. He continues by commenting, “No other human activity is so continuously or universally bound up with chance. And through the element of

⁸¹ Thucydides, 126.

⁸² Robert D. Luginbill, Thucydides on War and National Character (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) 105.

chance, guesswork and luck come to play a great part in war.⁸³ It is through chance that daring, a variant of courage, finds success.

The influence of chance on war is regulated to some degree by the quality of the commander. Chance continually causes unexpected events to occur. This surprises the commander and disrupts his plans, usually forcing him to make new ones. These changes are made during the operation, with time in short supply. Thus, chance forces the commander to question his intentions and leaves him little time to alter his plans.⁸⁴

Friction

At this point, friction usually asserts itself. The tremendous friction, ever present in war, is the single factor that most obviously distinguishes “real war from war on paper.”⁸⁵ Clausewitz displays remarkable depth in his discussion of friction. Beyerchen ascribes two different but related notions to Clausewitz’s concept of friction, and maintains that these demonstrate Clausewitz’s exceptional powers of astute observation and keen intuition.

First, Clausewitz means friction in the physical sense, which in his time would have related to the Second Law of Thermodynamics and the concept of entropy. As Beyerchen explains, “Friction is a nonlinear feedback effect that leads to the heat dissipation of energy in a system. The dissipation is a form of increasing degradation toward randomness, the essence of entropy.”⁸⁶ In the military sense, this means that continual friction leads the armed forces closer and closer to a state of disorganization. The most efficient counter to this friction is, according to Clausewitz, the “iron will” of

⁸³ Clausewitz 85.

⁸⁴ Clausewitz 102.

⁸⁵ Clausewitz 119.

the commander.⁸⁷ Constant training and rehearsal also counter friction. As Clausewitz points out, “Routine, apart from its sheer inevitability, also contains one positive advantage. Constant practice leads to *brisk, precise, and reliable* leadership, reducing the natural friction and easing the working of the machine.”⁸⁸

The second meaning of friction ascribed to Clausewitz by Beyerchen is the sense of friction used in information theory. In this sense, friction is analogous to static, or white noise, which disrupts communications. Beyerchen maintains that Clausewitz’s well-known discussion on the difficulty in obtaining accurate intelligence presents the problem of friction in terms of noise that “permeates the generation and transmission of information rising upward through the ranks.”⁸⁹ This is an important point. It implies that Clausewitz’s fog of war not only applies to information scarcity but also to information overload.

This point should be considered carefully by organizations such as the United States Navy, which is focusing on network-centric operations and a reliance on increased technology and information sharing to reduce fog and friction in war. Such reliance poses two risks. First, over reliance on such technology, especially in the absence of “iron willed” leadership will result in critical command failures when the technology itself breaks down. Thus, increased technology dependence, when impacted by friction, will increase, not decrease, the fog of war. Second, increased reliance on such technology will inevitably produce friction and distortion due to information overloading.

⁸⁶ Beyerchen 76.

⁸⁷ Clausewitz 119.

⁸⁸ Clausewitz 153.

⁸⁹ Beyerchen 77.

The problem for the commander will be how to rapidly sort an overwhelming quantity of data into manageable, useful intelligence.

Clausewitz instinctively grasps this leadership challenge. As he points out, the difficulty in addressing friction is complicated by the fact that friction in war is constantly in contact with chance.⁹⁰ He implies that this in turn produces effects that are difficult to predict, because these effects are due to chance, which itself is unpredictable. For example, he states that the commander often does not receive new information on time, and the latest reports “merely trickle in.”⁹¹ (In modern warfare this could very well be reversed – the commander may find himself overloaded with reports. The affect is the same; friction and uncertainty are introduced.) Clausewitz tells us that overcoming this friction requires two indispensable qualities: *Coup d’oeil* and courage.⁹² Thus, the leadership qualities discussed above are essential in the commander who hopes to overcome the debilitating effect of friction on the battlefield. The only weapon that an army has to combat friction, and in turn take advantage of the chances produced by friction, is leadership. “The good general must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible, and in order not to expect a standard of achievement in his operations which this very friction makes impossible.”⁹³

It is his careful consideration of chance and friction that sets Clausewitz apart from Jomini. Both had enough practical military experience to fully understand the importance of these factors. To Jomini, however, the unpredictability of chance and friction made them extrinsic to war theory – that which cannot be predicted does not fit a

⁹⁰ Clausewitz 120.

⁹¹ Clausewitz 102.

⁹² Clausewitz 102.

⁹³ Clausewitz 120.

prescriptive model. In contrast, it is this very fact that makes them critical to Clausewitz. The theorist must consider chance and friction because they are intrinsic to the “fabric of war.”⁹⁴

Clausewitz treatment of chance and friction is similar to modern chaos theory and non-linear analysis.⁹⁵ Chaos theorists contend that tiny, seemingly insignificant input to certain variables can result in unpredicted, overwhelming, and unmanageable differences in output. This is termed “sensitive dependence on initial conditions.”⁹⁶ Christopher Bassford maintains that nonlinear theory performs three valuable functions in relation to Clausewitz’s concepts; First, it confirms his assessment that the predictive approach to military theory is flawed; second, it offers scientific validation of Clausewitz’s view; finally, it gives historians a useful manner of comprehending the world in which Clausewitz bases his theories.⁹⁷

It could also be said that Clausewitz’s concepts provide an equally valuable function in relation to nonlinear theory. His treatment of war is based on real experience and tends to validate the claims of chaos theorists. Indeed, Clausewitz’s relevance today is largely due to this understanding of friction. As Alan Beyerchen points out, his work is “suffused with the understanding that every war is inherently a nonlinear phenomenon, the conduct of which changes its character in ways that cannot be analytically predicted.”⁹⁸ It is this unpredictable nature of war, articulated succinctly by Clausewitz in his chapter on friction, that leads Paul Van Riper to remark, “In the end, the

⁹⁴ Bassford, Clausewitz in English 25.

⁹⁵ Bassford, Clausewitz in English 26. Chaos theory has applications in such fields as military science, economics, physics, and biology, and meteorology.

⁹⁶ Bassford, Clausewitz in English 26.

⁹⁷ Bassford, Clausewitz in English 26.

⁹⁸ Alan Beyerchen, “Clausewitz, Nonlinearity, and the Unpredictability of War,” International Security, 17 (Winter 1992-1993): 61.

incalculables of determination, morale, fighting skill, and leadership far more than technology will determine who wins and who loses.”⁹⁹ In fact, it is this unpredictable nature of war that diminishes the value of prescriptive theories of war. The value of war theory is found only in relation to the study of history. Or, as Van Riper articulates:

Every war is inherently a nonlinear phenomenon, the conduct of which changes its character in ways that cannot be analytically predicted. Recognizing that, observers as far back as Thucydides have insisted that war can be perceived accurately only through the lens of history. To be useful, military theory must be grounded in the known realities of the past, not because the past repeats itself in specific ways, but rather because it reveals aspects of war which are timeless.¹⁰⁰

Thucydides says a great deal regarding the influence of fortune, chance, and accident on war, as well as the complication that friction brings to the battlefield. These observations tend to confirm the timeless verity of Clausewitz’s notion of friction. Thucydides reminds us to, “Consider the vast influence of accident in war, before you are engaged in it. As it continues, it generally becomes an affair of chances, chances from which neither of us is exempt, and whose event we must risk in the dark.”¹⁰¹ He uses a speech by Pericles to remind the reader that, “the course of things is as arbitrary as the plans of man; indeed this is why we usually blame chance for whatever does not happen as we expected.”¹⁰² Building on this theme, Thucydides admonishes military leaders to remain alert for the effects of friction when he remarks:

Indeed sensible men are prudent enough to treat their gains as precarious, just as they would also keep a clear head in adversity, and think that war, so far from staying within the limit to which a combatant may wish to confine it, will run the course that its chances prescribe; and thus, not being puffed up by confidence in military success, they are less

⁹⁹ Paul Van Riper and Robert H. Scales, Jr., “Preparing for War in the 21st Century,” Parameters, (Autumn 1997): 8.

¹⁰⁰ Van Riper and Scales 6.

¹⁰¹ Thucydides 44.

¹⁰² Thucydides 80.

likely to come to grief and most ready to make peace, if they can, while their fortune lasts.¹⁰³

After cautioning commanders to be alert for the adverse effects of chance, which can be amplified by the action of friction, Thucydides introduces an extremely insightful consideration: A wise leader can use friction and chance to his advantage, especially if he remembers that it is acting with impartiality against both adversaries. Thucydides raises this concept in Hermocrates speech to the Sicilians at Gela, when he writes, “The incalculable element in future exercises [has] the widest influence, and is the most treacherous, and yet in fact the most useful of all things, as it frightens us all equally, and thus makes us consider before attacking each other.”¹⁰⁴ Later in his history he continues this theme when Nicias tries to encourage his men by counseling that, “our misfortunes do not terrify me as much as they might. Indeed we may hope that they will be lightened: our enemies have had good fortune enough.”¹⁰⁵

Clearly, Thucydides places great emphasis on the role that chance played in determining the outcome of the Peloponnesian War. Chance intervened early in the conflict, when Athens’ lost one of its premier generals, Pericles, whose advice was disregarded later in the war, after his death, with the Athenian invasion of Sicily. Thucydides connects the Athenian defeat with the death of Pericles, who, according to Donald Kagan, “alone among Athenian politicians could persuade the people to fight in a way contrary to their prejudices and experiences.”¹⁰⁶ At the strategic level, Thucydides places equal emphasis on the influence of friction. In Kagan’s analysis, he points out that personal rivalries and factional disputes existed in Athens, especially regarding the debate

¹⁰³ Thucydides 233.

¹⁰⁴ Thucydides 257.

¹⁰⁵ Thucydides 472.

over whether to remove Alcibiades from command. Kagan believes that this friction caused Athens great harm and “ . . . had much to do with Athens’ loss of the war. The most serious consequence of Alcibiades’ disgrace was that it removed his friends and associates from influence and command when their military and political skills were most needed.”¹⁰⁷ From this illustration, it is evident that unintended consequences from friction can have far reaching effects. The internal conflicts within the Athenian *polis* and the resulting friction severely hampered the Athenians ability to provide suitable leadership to their forces.

Centers of Gravity

One means available to the commander for countering friction is center of gravity analysis. The basic connotation of Clausewitz’s center of gravity concept is apparent: The center of gravity is the primary source of a belligerent’s strength and power. The focal point of both belligerents is their center of gravity. The antagonist’s center of gravity is the point against which the protagonist must direct his energy, while protecting his own. Success depends upon identifying the enemy’s center of gravity and defeating it. A commander who identifies an enemy’s center of gravity and a means to defeat it, and informs his subordinates of that means in terms of his intent, will most likely be able to successfully counter the ill effects of friction on the battlefield.

The Spartans are able to take advantage of the influence of chance and friction on the battlefield by correctly identifying Athenian centers of gravity and the critical vulnerabilities that, if properly attacked, will defeat those centers. Chance intervenes and

¹⁰⁶ Donald Kagan, The Fall of the Athenian Empire, (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1987) 426.

¹⁰⁷ Kagan 420.

results in Pericles early demise. Friction denies the Athenians of capable leadership. Sparta and her allies capitalize on these events, turning them to their advantage, by correctly identifying and attacking Athenian centers of gravity.

Clausewitz defines center of gravity as “the hub of all power and movement, on which everything depends.”¹⁰⁸ The key meaning here is clear: *The center of gravity is the primary source of a belligerent’s strength and power.* Several fundamental points can be derived from this meaning. First, the focal point of both belligerents is their center of gravity. Second, everything depends on the center of gravity. Third, the antagonist’s center of gravity is the point against which the protagonist must direct his energy, while protecting his own center of gravity. And finally, success depends upon properly identifying the enemy’s center of gravity in order to defeat it.

Clausewitz allows that a belligerent may have multiple centers of gravity and identifies factors that complicate the ability to identify a single center of gravity.¹⁰⁹ Yet, he believes it is possible to reduce several centers of gravity to a single center of gravity in almost all cases.¹¹⁰ Debating whether multiple centers of gravity are possible misses the central point:

Still, no matter what the central feature of the enemy’s power may be – the point on which your efforts must converge – the defeat and destruction of his fighting force remains the best way to begin, and in every case will be a very significant feature of the campaign.¹¹¹

It can be argued that this passage indicates that the enemy’s army is always the center of gravity. More likely, Clausewitz is simply stating that the best way to begin to reach the enemy’s center of gravity is to defeat and destroy his military. It is critical here

¹⁰⁸ Clausewitz 595-596.

¹⁰⁹ These indications are presented in Clausewitz on p. 617.

¹¹⁰ Clausewitz 597.

to use Clausewitz's own definition of destruction: “[putting the enemy's forces] *in such a condition that they can no longer carry on the fight*. Whenever we use the phrase ‘destruction of the enemy's forces’ this alone is what we mean.”¹¹²

This is an important point, as it indicates that the physical eradication of the enemy is not required. It is enough to place the enemy in a condition where he is no longer able or willing to fight. For example, removal of all command and control nodes and using psychological operations to induce the enemy's army to surrender *en masse* equates to the destruction of his forces. Clausewitz elaborates on his center of gravity concept by claiming that the enemy can usually be defeated by accomplishing one or more of three acts: destruction of the army; seizure of the capital, if it is the center of political and social activity; and effectively defeating the enemy's principle ally, if that ally is more powerful than the enemy.

Clausewitz first discusses the concept of centers of gravity in terms of unity.¹¹³ All fighting forces have some degree of unity. This unity results in a proportional degree of unit cohesion, which leads Clausewitz to use the term center of gravity, analogous to the use of the term in the science of physics.

In physics, the center of gravity of an object is the point at which all its mass can be concentrated without altering the effect of gravitation upon it. That is, it is the point at which a body acted upon by gravity is balanced in all positions. In war, the unity and balance inherent in a fighting force is dependent upon some point or area of greatest concentration, significance, or interest. This area is the center of gravity of the force. The

¹¹¹ Clausewitz 596.

¹¹² Clausewitz 90.

¹¹³ Clausewitz 485-486.

balance (or stability) of the fighting force is dependent upon this point or area, just as the balance of a physical body is defined by its center of gravity.

Clausewitz uses this analogy to impose an oft-overlooked dictum on the military planner: In war, as in physics, the degree of cohesion determines the effect suffered by a center of gravity. A planner must determine the degree of cohesion in order to determine the level of force required. Too little force will fail to defeat the center of gravity; too much force is a waste of energy that could be applied elsewhere. This is analogous to Jomini's principle of economy of force.

This leads to Clausewitz's next premise: Center of gravity identification is a major act of strategic judgement.¹¹⁴ Sound leadership is fundamental in proper identification of centers of gravity and the subsequent formulation and execution of plans aimed at defeating them. There are three underlying concepts to this premise: centers of gravity always exist within an enemy force, it is a major act to determine these centers of gravity, and they are dynamic in relation to the advances and retreats of forces.

Clausewitz's meaning here is easily misconstrued. Clearly, centers of gravity can exist within a force (i.e. it is insufficient to state that the enemy force is the center of gravity) and can be dynamic based on enemy force movements. Thus, determining centers of gravity requires a strong leader capable of performing continuous critical analysis.

Clausewitz asserts two basic principles that should underlie all strategic planning. First, the source of the enemy's power must be identified back to the source (i.e. the center of gravity). Ideally this can be identified as a single source. Second, speed is

essential when attacking that source.¹¹⁵ Success depends upon rapidly identifying the center of gravity in order to defeat it. This is the key principle in the concept of centers of gravity. The planner must identify centers of gravity, if possible reducing them to a single source. The commander must concentrate forces against that center in a main offensive.¹¹⁶

While Athenian strategists do not use the term center of gravity, they fundamentally understand the concept, at least early in the Peloponnesian War. Pericles advises the Athenians to retreat behind their walls and not directly confront the Spartan hoplites. He argues that the enemy's critical vulnerability is money, and that Athens' sea power will be more effective against Sparta's land force than that force will be against the Athenian navy. Additionally, he knows that obtaining the skill and financial resources required to build an equivalent navy will be virtually impossible for Sparta.¹¹⁷

Thus, Pericles understands that the hoplite force is the Spartan center of gravity, and that direct confrontation of that force would be foolhardy. Further, Pericles understands that Athens' center of gravity is their superior naval power and he seeks to utilize it to control sea lines of communication. Finally, he understands that the Spartan critical vulnerability is their national treasury, which he predicts will be unable to support an extended campaign against an enemy unwilling to risk direct confrontation on land.

Understandably, this produces asymmetric centers of gravity – Athens' navy versus Sparta's army. Both forces are able to correctly identify their opponent's center of

¹¹⁴ See Dr. Joe Strange, Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities (Quantico: MCU Foundation, 1996) p. 143. Dr. Strange seems to disagree that center of gravity identification is a major act. He indicates that identifying enemy and friendly centers of gravity should be “relatively easy”.

¹¹⁵ Clausewitz 617.

¹¹⁶ Clausewitz 619.

¹¹⁷ Thucydides 80-85.

gravity. Unfortunately, Athens is unable to exploit the critical vulnerability in Sparta that Pericles has identified. Sparta, on the other hand, is able to exploit Athenian critical vulnerabilities in order to defeat the Athenian navy.¹¹⁸

Athens' invasion of Sicily illustrates this point. This invasion plays into the Spartan center of gravity. It forces Athens to fight with unsustainable land and naval forces. The extended sea lines of communication prevent Athens from sustaining their force, exposing these sea lines as a critical vulnerability that Sparta is able to exploit. Sparta exploits this vulnerability – the expense of maintaining a fleet of triremes over extended distances – by inciting oligarchic uprisings among Athens' democratic allies. Quelling these uprisings bleeds Athens' treasure white, and forces the Athenians to utilize their 1,000-talent reserve to support their Navy.

Additionally, Sparta is able to use diplomatic maneuvers to bring Persia's navy into the conflict. This allows the Spartans to attack Athens' center of gravity symmetrically, navy against navy, and eliminates their own critical vulnerability – the financial inability to build and support a new Spartan fleet. Furthermore, by modifying their triremes to fight bow to bow, Athenian adversaries develop superior naval tactics and decisively defeat the Athenian center of gravity, à la Clausewitz. Pericles had argued that Sparta would not be able to train a navy capable of confronting the skilled Athenian sailors. Insightful leadership, technical innovation, radical new tactics and the strong use of alliances render this Spartan critical vulnerability irrelevant.

Spartan leaders understand the fundamental importance of center of gravity identification. Moreover, they find ways to attack centers of gravity, both directly and

¹¹⁸ For further discussion of critical vulnerabilities and their use to defeat centers of gravity see Dr. Joe Strange's work, Centers of Gravity and Critical Vulnerabilities.

indirectly, by identifying key critical vulnerabilities, and working hard to exploit Athenian vulnerabilities while eliminating their own. Modern military planners would be well served to hone their skills of analysis and course of action development by examining historical cases such as that offered by Sparta, in the context of Clausewitz's essential points on this concept, while avoiding prescriptive approaches that purport to offer end all solutions for center of gravity identification and defeat.

The Culminating Point

Ultimately, the strategic decision that exposed Athens' center of gravity and led to their defeat was the fateful decision to launch an expedition to Sicily. It was this decision that extended the Athenians past their culminating point. Clausewitz discusses the concept of a culminating point at various levels. At the tactical and operational level of war he describes the "culminating point of the attack" as the point in the attack beyond which further attack is impossible, and a force becomes susceptible to counter-attack.¹¹⁹ At the strategic level he addresses the "culminating point of victory" and concludes that it is not always possible for a victor in war to completely overthrow his adversary. He argues that even if a general tries to destroy the enemy completely, he must accept the fact that every advance necessarily weakens his force. He summarizes the difficulty in correctly identifying a culminating point and not exceeding it.

The challenge for a successful leader is to recognize the culminating point, thereby not stopping short of all possible gains, and at the same time not exceeding them and subsequently exposing himself to strategic defeat. Directly addressing the difficulty of identifying the culminating point, Clausewitz states:

This is why the great majority of generals will prefer to stop well short of their objective rather than risk approaching it too closely, and why those with high courage and enterprising spirit will often overshoot it and so fail to attain their purpose. Only the man who can achieve great results with limited means has really hit the mark.¹²⁰

Thucydides plainly illustrates this concept in his description of the disastrous Sicilian expedition. Asked by the Egestaeans to honor an old alliance and come to their aid in their struggle against Syracuse, the Athenians are also driven by their lust for power and riches, as well as their desire to wage a decisive battle against Sparta, thereby hastening an Athenian victory. This was not to be the case.

The Egestaeans' impassioned plea, and the subsequent dialogue between Nicias and Alcibiades, is analogous to the earlier speeches of the Corinthians and Athenian businessmen at Council in Sparta, which occurred just prior to the outbreak of the war.¹²¹ Both of these dialogues utilize the dialectic to present arguments for and against war. In the Council of Sparta, Spartan King Archidamus recommends caution, prudent advice that is later echoed by Nicias in his argument against the Sicilian expedition.¹²² These arguments are contrasted by the antitheses presented by Sthenelaidas at the Council of Sparta, and Alcibiades in the Athenian *polis*. Thus, the speeches of Archidamus and Sthenelaidas foreshadow the debate conducted in Athens over whether to expand the war. It is this expansion that leads Athens to exceed their culminating point, resulting in strategic overstretch that contributes to their defeat.

The great irony of the Sicilian expedition is that Athens, relying on their great naval advantage for a decisive victory, was unable to support the forces they sent abroad

¹¹⁹ Clausewitz 528.

¹²⁰ Clausewitz 573.

¹²¹ Thucydides 45-47.

¹²² Thucydides 369.

to conquer Sicily. Their naval capacity was stretched beyond imaginable limits, and the expedition soon began to exhaust the Athenians, who could not continue to support the rising costs of maintaining lengthy logistical routes without increasing taxes.¹²³ It was at this time that Athens was forced to replace the tribute system (by which their tributaries and dependent cities paid a fixed amount annually) with an import and export tax on all trade conducted by sea. This was the beginning of the end for Athens, as it raised the tension between the Athenians and their subjects, and increased the likelihood of revolts.¹²⁴

This strategic overstretch was further complicated by the tactical defeat of the Athenians by the Syracusans. The Peloponnesian War was above all else a classic confrontation between a great land power and a great naval power.¹²⁵ Both sides entered the war hoping to remain in their own element. However, in order to win, each side had to develop the ability to fight in their opponent's domain. Syracuse was able to decisively win a naval battle in their harbor.¹²⁶ Athens had chosen to fight in an enclosed harbor, instead of along a stretch of friendly coastline nearer to home. In the past, if Athens found its ships at a disadvantage it could retreat and conserve its forces to fight another day. No such retreat was possible in the confines of the Syracusan harbor. The Syracusans were able to take full advantage of this with their modified ships and innovative tactics.

Athens' strategic overstretch beyond the sensible limits of their culminating point renewed Sparta's confidence and lengthened the war. Ultimately, the defeat of the

¹²³ Thucydides 443.

¹²⁴ Thucydides 443.

¹²⁵ Kagan 423.

¹²⁶ Thucydides 458.

Sicilian expedition proved to be the turning point of the war. Sparta reentered the war and established a strong alliance with Persia.¹²⁷ Meanwhile, the Athenians are shocked by the disaster that occurs in Sicily and discouraged by their lack of financial resources to continue the war and rebuild their fleet.¹²⁸ The resultant internal disputes within Athens lead to turmoil in the *polis*. Eventually the constitution is modified, and democracy in Athens is effectively ended.¹²⁹

The Trinity

This interaction between military events, the Athenian populace's reaction, and the resulting political implications illustrates the complex dependencies present in Clausewitz's often discussed trinity of war: the interaction of primordial violence, which is the concern of the people; chance (and the resulting friction), which is the concern of the military; and policy, which is the concern of the government.¹³⁰ Clausewitz does not have a great deal to say about this trinity, but it has been the subject of a moderate amount of academic discussion. He reflects that the three tendencies act like three different "codes of law" that vary in their relationship to one another. He submits that the task of the military theorist is to develop a theory "that maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets."¹³¹ The interaction of these three elements is ever present in Thucydides.

This interaction is amplified by Athens structure of government. The people are the government (except for women and slaves) and the generals are the principal

¹²⁷ Thucydides 482.

¹²⁸ Thucydides 481.

¹²⁹ Thucydides 519.

¹³⁰ Clausewitz 89.

¹³¹ Clausewitz 89.

government leaders. The frenzied will of the people leads to the government's decision to invade Sicily. Chance intervenes early, when Pericles, Athens strongest wartime leader, dies two years after the onset of the war. Thus, consideration of the interplay of the trinity significantly contributes to a fuller understanding of the underlying causes of Athens ultimate defeat.

As previously illustrated, effective leaders – men who can move their countrymen to act contrary to the national will – are relatively scarce in Thucydides. This has the significant influence of greatly heightening the role and the weight of national character on Athenian decision-making.¹³² Thucydides remarks that the Spartans were the most suitable people for the Athenians to wage war against, and attributes this to the striking contrast between their national wills. He argues that the slow, cautious Spartans will be at a significant disadvantage against the daring, swift moving Athenians. He remarks:

The Spartans proved the most convenient people in the world for Athenians to be at war with. The wide difference between the two characters, the slowness and want of energy of the Spartans as contrasted with the dash and enterprise of their opponents, proved of the greatest service, especially to a maritime empire like Athens.¹³³

Ironically, this “dash and enterprise” contributes to the defeat of Athens. The will of the Athenian people – their desire for violent confrontation – demands that the war be expanded against Sicily. There the Athenians encounter the Syracusans, “who were most like the Athenians in character, and also most successful in combating them.”¹³⁴ Spartan fear of Athenian character motivates most of their actions. It is this fear that leads them to war in the first place.¹³⁵ It was this fear that causes them to re-enter the war against

¹³² Luginbill 105.

¹³³ Thucydides 539.

¹³⁴ Thucydides 539.

¹³⁵ Luginbill 105.

Athens later in the conflict. At this point, Alcibiades encourages the Spartans not to engage in their characteristic caution.

Not only is Spartan motivation for recommencing hostilities “identical to their initial motivation at the start of the Peloponnesian War,” but their strategy for waging war remains cautious, consistent with their national character. Thucydides gives good reason to believe that “the Spartans would have been unlikely to reenter the war without external pressure, favorable circumstances, and a false confidence regarding Athenian abilities.”¹³⁶

Here, the interaction of all three elements of the trinity is apparent. Spartan policy, the concern of the government, is established that leads the normally cautious Spartan people to move violently against Athens, despite a national character motivated primarily by fear, not aggression. Chance (favorable circumstances) bolsters the Spartan military effort, primarily through the revolts of several Athenian allies and the surprising successes of several key Spartan allies, including Syracuse. These events mark the beginning of a new Spartan approach to the war, emphasizing a new naval strategy that minimizes risk to their hoplites and themselves.¹³⁷ It is this approach that ultimately proves successful, and marks the beginning of the end of the Athenian Empire.

¹³⁶ Luginbill 122.

¹³⁷ Lugenbill 123-124.

Chapter 3

Clausewitz, Thucydides, and Their Relevance Today

"Let us not shrink from the risk, but let us remember that this is just the occasion for one of the baseless panics common in war; and that to be able to guard against these in one's own case, and to detect the moment when an attack will find an enemy at this disadvantage, is what makes a successful general."

- Thucydides¹³⁸

"Once the antagonists have ceased to be mere figments of a theory and become actual states and governments, when war is no longer a theoretical affair but a series of actions obeying its own peculiar laws, reality supplies the data from which we can deduce the unknown that lies ahead."

- Carl Von Clausewitz¹³⁹

Analysis of the Peloponnesian War via the war theory concepts of Clausewitz illuminates critical shortcomings in Athenian strategy, as well as strengths in Spartan strategy, that lead to Athens' ultimate defeat. Additionally, this analysis illustrates the verity of Clausewitz's major themes, and demonstrates the importance of considering history when developing strategy and operational theory. Perhaps more importantly, this analysis yields valuable lessons to modern war planners, and admonishes contemporary strategists to consider the influence of leadership on warfighting. It may be argued that

¹³⁸ Thucydides 172.

¹³⁹ Clausewitz 80.

leadership has been de-emphasized in recent years, especially with the advent of modern weapons and communications technologies in the information age.

Such advances have led to great emphasis on warfighting experimentation in terms of doctrinal development, perhaps at the expense of historical analysis and leadership training. Thankfully, the Marine Corps has not embraced this recent trend and continues to “equip Marines, not man equipment.”¹⁴⁰ To quote from then Lieutenant General Van Riper’s testimony before the House National Security committee on March 20, 1997:

. . . the explosive growth of information technologies over the past decade has resulted in a number of extraordinary claims about the future of war. Some of these claims have gone so far as to argue that technology will allow us to see and understand everything in the battlespaces of the future – even to eliminate the “fog” and “friction” of war. There are indeed great changes that are occurring with civilian and military technologies. But our view in the Marine Corps is that these changes will only allow us to improve our capabilities; they will not alter the fundamental nature of war. . . The microchip has not made Thucydides, Clausewitz, or Mahan irrelevant. In fact, all of the trends in modern science, evolutionary biology, nonlinear mathematics, and quantum physics underline that Clausewitz’s fundamental belief that we do not live in a predictable universe was right on target. Thus the two fundamental factors that drive the Marine Corps approach to command and control are uncertainty and time. Of these, uncertainty is dominant. In the words of Clausewitz, “War is the realm of uncertainty; three quarters of the factors on which action in war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser.” Therefore, command and control is essentially about effective decision making and effective execution. The sole measure of effectiveness of any command and control component – technology, organization, procedure, whatever – is whether it facilitates timely decision making and execution. Stripped to its essentials, this is what command and control is all about.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Lieutenant General John E. Rhodes, Statement Before the House Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., February 23, 1999.

¹⁴¹ Lieutenant General Paul Van Riper, Testimony Before the House National Security Committee, Washington, D.C., March 20, 1997.

Description versus Prescription

It is this fundamental lack of predictability in war that makes Clausewitz and Thucydides so valuable. The Marine Corps recognizes that Clausewitz, by nature, is descriptive, not prescriptive.¹⁴² Prescription stifles initiative, as well as intuition and creativity on the battlefield. It leads to stagnant and dogmatic doctrine and creates an environment prone to analysis paralysis. The lesson from Clausewitz remains that theory cannot be prescriptive, and that historical analysis during peacetime stimulates intuitive action during time of war. The value in studying Thucydides is that significant historical lessons, relevant to today's warfighter, can be extracted from this work when it is considered in the context of Clausewitz's major themes.

Marine Corps doctrine instructs, "The military profession is a thinking profession. Every Marine is expected to be a student of the art and science of war."¹⁴³ As such, leaders must possess a firm foundation of both military theory and military history. This foundation must be built in peacetime, in order to actively adapt to the fog and friction present in wartime. Historical lessons such as those taught by Thucydides and illuminated by Clausewitz provide the foundation for the skills of anticipation and intuition so vital to success on the battlefield. The ability to anticipate requires the ability to forecast future enemy actions. These forecasts must have some basis. Whenever possible they are based on past personal experience. Historical lessons serve to amplify this experience and, in the absence of experience, are the only tool a leader has with which to base the intuitive, non-prescriptive approach to war expected by the Marine Corps. A firm understanding of

¹⁴² MCDP 1-1, Strategy, (Quantico: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1997) 13.

¹⁴³ MCDP 1, Warfighting, (Quantico: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1997) 57.

history facilitates planning. Planning is a type of anticipatory adjustment – adapting procedures and courses of action in advance.¹⁴⁴

History can also facilitate the development of immediate-action drills and standing operating procedures at the tactical level. These allow leaders to rapidly adapt to changing situations at the tactical level of war. Thus, a foundation in history, such as that provided by reading and understanding Clausewitz and Thucydides, is useful at all levels of war. Granted, immediate-action drills are by their nature prescriptive. However, they can be better formulated, understood, and applied if developed in the context of historical lessons learned. Having a collection of these tools allows Marines to react immediately *in a coordinated way* to a broad variety of tactical situations; they provide the basis for adaptation.¹⁴⁵ Another way to adapt is to improvise – “to adjust to a situation *on the spur of the moment without any preparation.*”¹⁴⁶ This is critical in a maneuver warfare environment and requires leaders who have an intuitive understanding of which solutions will work.¹⁴⁷ The ability to improvise is enhanced by a thorough mental library of historically relevant lessons upon which a leader can instinctively draw.

The Importance of Critical Analysis

Current Marine Corps doctrine espouses this ability to instinctively react and improvise in the rapidly changing environment of combat. Decision-making theory, as discussed in MCDP 6, Command and Control Theory, consists of two basic views: Analytical decision-making and intuitive decision-making. MCDP 6 instructs that the

¹⁴⁴ MCDP 1, Warfighting 57.

¹⁴⁵ MCWP 0-1, Marine Corps Operations, (Quantico: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1999) 5-13.

¹⁴⁶ MCWP 0-1, Marine Corps Operations 5-14.

¹⁴⁷ MCWP 0-1, Marine Corps Operations 5-14.

methodical and time-consuming approach of analytical decision-making is inappropriate in a maneuver warfare environment. Such an environment requires the ability for a leader to instinctively “recognize key elements of a particular problem and arrive at the proper decision.”¹⁴⁸ In order to make these instinctive decisions, however, a leader must have a firm grasp of historical relevant material that he has previously subjected to critical analysis.

Thus, the position that analysis is not required is flawed. Analysis is required, but it must be conducted prior to the time that a decision is required. Historical perspective alone is not sufficient. A library full of historical facts is fairly useless to a commander unless he has subjected these facts to some critical analysis and garnered relevant lessons from that material. He must possess the ability to exercise pattern recognition on the battlefield and draw upon both personal experience and the relevant lessons he has learned from previously conducted critical analysis of historical material.¹⁴⁹ Reading the historical record of Thucydides, and subsequently subjecting it to such critical analysis, can assist a leader who is required to react instinctively by providing him with relevant lessons that he may draw upon in order to rapidly develop the appropriate strategy, operational course of action, or tactical situation.

Modern Times, Timeless Approaches

Clausewitz’s approach to critical analysis is timeless and is in concert with Marine Corps doctrine at all levels of war. Students should be able to apply the concepts outlined by Clausewitz when conducting any campaign analysis. Applying these

¹⁴⁸ MCDP 6, Command and Control, (Quantico: Marine Corps Combat Development Command, 1996) 102.

concepts to Thucydides provides a relevant example of such analysis because it verifies Clausewitz's work by applying it to the earliest recorded rational history of war. Such analysis provides better insight into the cause and effect of the Peloponnesian War and assists the modern student by illuminating timeless lessons at every level of war. In the information age, such lessons are especially important. They tend to amplify that fog and friction on the battlefield are as old as warfare itself. Despite recent claims to the contrary, fog and friction will not likely decrease with the advent of modern command and control technology, but will more likely increase.¹⁵⁰

Leadership

At tactical and operational levels, leadership, not technology, will continue to provide the key to effectively coping with the ever-present challenges of war. On the strategic level, leadership provides the key to coping with the challenges inherent in formulating effective strategy. Effective strategy may be at odds with the national character of the particular nation, as was the case of Athenian national character in the Peloponnesian War. MCDP 1-1, Strategy instructs that nations have distinct characters and that change in character is often imperceptible, as it occurs very slowly.¹⁵¹ In Thucydides' estimation, an effective leader must be able to correctly estimate a situation and arrive at a strategy suitable to the immediate demands of the moment – as recognized by both Clausewitz and Marine Corps doctrine – while resisting impulses that are overly optimistic or based upon misplaced fear.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Clausewitz 156-168.

¹⁵⁰ Lieutenant General Van Riper, Testimony Before the House National Security Committee.

¹⁵¹ MCDP 1-1, Strategy 23.

¹⁵² Luginbill 189.

Several lessons in leadership related directly to these points emerge from a careful analysis of Pericles' last speech as recorded in Thucydides' history.¹⁵³ In this speech, Pericles states:

You are angry with me, although if anyone has the ability to determine what measures should be taken and to communicate them to you, I certainly can. Furthermore, I love my country and I cannot be bought. Someone may feel he has a better strategy. Let him consider that if he cannot effectively convince the people to follow it, it is one and the same as if he had never thought it up in the first place. And if neither of these elements is lacking, but the man is a traitor, he will certainly not speak in his country's best interest. And if he is not an out and out traitor, yet is susceptible to corruption, then he is liable to sell out the cause for money.¹⁵⁴

As Robert D. Luginbill demonstrates in his work, Thucydides on War and National Character, three essential leadership principles are evident here.¹⁵⁵ First, to be effective a leader must be able to develop a strategy based on incomplete information. As both Clausewitz and Marine Corps doctrine point out, critical analysis of historical cases can help a leader hone this valuable assessment skill. Second, a leader must have the support of the people in order to implement a plausible strategy. A strategy may be practical, but it is infeasible without the support of the people. This is illustrated in Clausewitz's principle of the trinity of war, and the interaction of the various elements of that trinity. Yet, this leadership lesson goes beyond the oversimplification that strategy must be supported by the people. An effective leader can persuade the citizens of a nation to pursue a strategy that is in conflict with their national character. In some cases, leaders must have the courage to pursue strategies contrary to the peoples' will, and continue to work diligently to shape that will while the strategy is being executed.

¹⁵³ Luginbill, 189.

¹⁵⁴ Thucydides 124.

¹⁵⁵ Luginbill, 190.

Finally, Thucydides demonstrates that in order to manage the task of shaping the will of the people, the leader must be beyond reproach. His personal character and moral stance must be untarnished. He must demonstrate self-control and ethical behavior in all respects. Without such character, coupled with a genuine dedication to those he is responsible for, his leadership abilities will be fully compromised. In Thucydides' opinion, these leadership traits are present in Pericles, and the intervention of chance removes Pericles from the scene, denying Athens the leadership they require to effectively pursue a campaign that is at odds with their national character.

Conclusion

Applying Clausewitz's concepts to Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War illustrates the timeless validity of Clausewitz's theories. This is remarkable, as the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War occurred over 2,400 years before Clausewitz articulated these concepts. It is fitting however, as Clausewitz himself comments on the benefit of studying military theory in the context of historical examples. He identifies four points of view that are enabled by the use of historical examples: First, historical examples may serve as an explanation of an abstract idea that otherwise might be misunderstood; second, they may serve to show the application of an idea and allow for the illustration of minor points that are not visible by examination in isolation of the general theory; third, they may be used to prove the plausibility of a statement of theory; finally, examination of historical events make it possible to deduce doctrine.¹⁵⁶

This last point deserves special attention. More recently, military services and the joint community have turned to simulations and warfighting experiments to develop new

doctrine suited for emerging technologies. There is an inherent shortcoming in this method of doctrine development. Experimentation can never adequately simulate the friction and chance associated with actual war that impacts the complex combination of variables that disrupts the most well-intentioned plans in combat. This shortcoming can only be addressed by the application of theory to relevant historical examples, as Clausewitz suggests.

Thus, warfighting experiments must be complemented by relevant historical analysis. Clausewitz cautions the reader to avoid examining ancient history to validate theory except in the examination of broad generalities. Yet, it is these broad generalities found in Clausewitz that are worthy of examination via Thucydides. Examination of Clausewitz's general concepts in this context provides a valid theoretical explanation for the outcome of the Peloponnesian War. It also reveals shortcomings in some modern approaches to warfighting, and illustrates the danger of ignoring the essential truth of these broad Clausewitzian concepts when developing doctrine for emerging technologies. It is in this light that that timeless value of the concepts elucidated by Clausewitz and demonstrated by Thucydides is most apparent.

¹⁵⁶ Clausewitz 171.

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